

# Martin Buber: Philosopher of dialogue and of the resolution of conflict

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Professor W. John Morgan discusses the life and thought of Martin Buber, and asks whether his concepts of dialogue can help today in efforts to resolve conflicts in the Middle East, and between other communities in dispute.

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MARTIN BUBER is recognised as one of the outstanding existentialist philosophers of the 20th century. His thought focuses on dialogue and community and this alone identifies him as a significant thinker for educators. Buber was himself engaged in adult education, first in Germany under the Nazis and later in Palestine and Israel. Following his removal by the Nazis from the Chair of Philosophy of Religion at the University of Frankfurt, he became the Director of Jewish adult education programmes, until his final departure for Palestine in 1938, when he took up the Chair of Social Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Although attacked frequently by opponents within the Zionist movement and by Arab nationalists, he was persistent in seeking points of understanding and reconciliation between Jew and Arab. He died on 13 June 1965. The question is, does Buber's philosophy of education as dialogue, coupled with his record as an adult educator, provide a model for the resolution of communal conflict? If so, efforts, based on this model, to achieve dialogue between communities in dispute, accompanied by their practical co-operation, through education, would be worthwhile. The dilemma of Palestine and Israel, with which Martin Buber was most intimately concerned is a notable and persistent example of such a conflict and yet is, paradoxically, one that it is possible to resolve through dialogue.

At the Zionist Congress in 1922, Buber put forward a resolution emphasising the community of interest between Jew and Arab in Palestine. This was so emasculated by the Congress' editorial committee that according to Buber the marrow and the blood were removed. It was, he said, an experience that set a pattern for his future intellectual and political life. He determined never again to sacrifice truth to expediency, although after the creation of the State of Israel in 1949 he was criticised by some for compromising with

it. His experience as a Jew in National Socialist Germany confirmed him in this moral and philosophical outlook. Following his effective expulsion from the University of Frankfurt, he was forbidden to write, publish or teach in German 'Aryan' institutions and his books and articles were blacklisted and destroyed. The boycott of so-called 'non-Aryan' thought such as Buber's, was an example of the Nazi attempt to bring an end



Professor Martin Buber. Photographer Moshe Prodan.  
By courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel

to intellectual freedom and to the possibility of dialogue with others. Working in an atmosphere of terror and oppression, Martin Buber guided the activities of the surviving Jewish youth and adult education organizations in Germany. Finally, Buber was persuaded that he and his family should leave for Palestine, where he took up a professorship at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Both in Germany and in Palestine Buber advocated and practised a philosophy that saw the purpose of education as contributing to human freedom and to the liberation of personality. The task of education, he argued, was to develop students' character in a way that would enable them to live in society humanely. The teacher's task was not to instruct students in what was right or wrong in absolute terms, but to help them to discover truth for themselves through the process of dialogue and enquiry. This was set out most clearly in his well-known book

*Between Man and Man* (1947).<sup>1</sup> He argued that there were no absolute formulas for living, for as people live they grow and their beliefs change. The practice of dialogue was core to this process of education and of maturity. He believed that this was as true for communities as for individuals. In his *Tales of the Hasidim* (1947),<sup>2</sup> he stated that there were three kinds of dialogue. First, *genuine* dialogue, which may be spoken or silent, where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others and turns to them with the intention of establishing an authentic mutual relationship. Secondly, there is *technical* dialogue, which is prompted by the need of objective understanding. Finally, there is *monologue*, disguised as dialogue, in which each speaks to the other in circuitous ways and yet imagined that they had escaped what he described as the torment of being thrown back on their own resources. The implications of each of the above for educational practice, both for individuals and for communities, are considerable.

In addition to Martin Buber's own considerable output, there is now an extensive literature on his life and work. However, this has focussed essentially on his existentialist philosophy of religion and on his Jewish scholarship, particularly his studies of Hasidism. Again, what has been written on Buber's philosophy of education has focussed on the application of his 'I-Thou principle' to the relationships between parent and child, between teacher and pupil and between individuals, again usually children in the class-room or at play. These are also relationships that imply different levels of maturity. The significance of Buber's philosophy of dialogue for relations between mature communities of adults in dispute remains relatively unexplored. Yet such communities, often distant culturally and set in attitudes reinforced by perceived rights and injustices suffered, need to enter into sustained dialogue if their conflict is to end.



PM Ehud Olmert (R) meets with Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), at the PM's office in Jerusalem. Photographer Amos Ben Gershom. By courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel

The question is how? The social and political implications of Martin Buber's life and thought have a profound significance for the achievement of *genuine* dialogue between individuals and the communities to which they belong. The successful practice of *technical* dialogue, with a view to achieving objective understanding of a mutual problem or situation, should also not be underestimated as a means of resolving conflict. The capacity to recognise the *impasse* of monologue, masquerading as dialogue is also of fundamental importance. In order to achieve *authentic* dialogue and conflict resolution between communities, it is necessary to understand that, for Buber, this means more than according justice, crucial though that is, or building a framework for mutual economic advancement. These entail the elimination of the *objective* sources of conflict. However, according to Buber, such actions must be accompanied by a spiritual transformation that eliminates the *subjective* sources of conflict. It is also the case that often external partisans of the respective causes, even when well-meaning, aggravate the conflict and make dialogue more difficult to achieve. In short, mediators are preferable to advocates, while direct dialogic encounter between those in dispute is best of all.

Martin Buber believed that dialogue was an integral part of Hebrew humanism and should be, as such, a moral principle of the Jewish community in Palestine. Dialogue and attentive silence should be practised not only by individuals within the community, but in

relation to individuals outside the community and between communities. Accordingly, he founded, with others, *Ichud* or Unity, a political and cultural movement which worked for Jewish-Arab understanding and for the establishment of a bi-national state in Palestine once the British Mandate came to an end. This would, he believed, be possible through authentic education, which was one of dialogue, with the aim of realising the capacity to relate maturely to others. This had profound implications for his relationship with Zionism and with the Arab nationalists. He proposed forming a federation of Middle East states to link the Jewish community with its Arab neighbours. He opposed the partition of Palestine as this would lead to an armed clash between Jews and Arabs. When that clash came in 1949, the practical possibility of a bi-national state, never very likely, vanished and with it the programme of *Ichud*. However, Buber continued to argue for dialogue, for creating the space within which reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian might eventually be possible. He believed that this might be achieved through the many small opportunities and daily decisions which individual Israelis and Palestinians had before them. He emphasised what both peoples held in common and called upon them to use this common ground to discuss and settle the matters upon which they disagreed. In 1949 Buber founded the Israeli Institute for Adult Education, one of the first examples of training for adult educators in the world. It trained teachers for work among Jewish immigrants in the reception camps, refugees

from post-war Europe and Oriental Jews expelled from Arab countries after 1949. He asked how might Israel create a unified nation, which at the time did not exist? How much more difficult, but just as necessary he argued, was it to find common purpose and unity with Arab neighbours and those of other faiths? The position of those Palestinians who had been uprooted and were now in refugee camps was fundamental to this necessary dialogue. Buber's philosophy of education is one of dialogue which requires willing partners in the conversation. It depends on a readiness to find reconciliation through points of common interest, rather than in the defence of entrenched positions. This is the impasse that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has now reached and against which Martin Buber warned.

Today, Israeli and Palestinian seem as far away as ever from mutual recognition and dialogue, let alone reconciliation and co-operation. Yet dialogue and co-operation do take place and not only that like the recent Annapolis conference mediated by the representatives of external powers such as the United States or through the peace-keeping forces of the United Nations. One prominent example is that of intellectual dialogue through the pages of the *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*. This was founded by Victor Ciegelman and Ziad Abu-Zayyad (who continues as joint editor with Hillel Schenker). It is now in its fourteenth volume and provides an excellent forum for detailed discussion among Palestinians, Israelis and other in the spirit of dialogue and with the aim of peaceful co-operation and co-existence, without predicting specific political solutions. The most recent number focuses on *Future Options*, including discussions from various perspectives of the bi-national state and of the two-state solutions.<sup>3</sup> Another important example of dialogue is a joint project, begun in 2002 and led by academics from Ben Gurion University in Beersheba, a city in southern Israel, and from Bethlehem University in the Palestinian territories. This devised a series of booklets for experimental use in a small number of Israeli and Palestinian schools that present the conflicting perceptions of what is a common history. The aim, the project leaders claim, is

to ensure that the teaching of history no longer feeds the conflict. This project is continued by the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), as reported in a recent number of *Newsweek*.<sup>4</sup>

There is co-operation also at the level of advanced scientific research. This is developed through the Israel-Palestine Science Organization (IPSO)<sup>5</sup> established following UNESCO's Round Table on Science for Peace in the Middle East, held in Paris in 2002. This is chaired jointly by Sari Nusseibeh, President of *Al Quds* University, Jerusalem, and by Menahem Yaari, President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. (Martin Buber was the first President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.) The mission of the IPSO is to build upon the willingness of many Israeli and Palestinian scientists and scholars to co-operate on projects that will create an infrastructure capable of achieving sustainable development in both communities. The supporters of IPSO, Israeli, Palestinian and others, also believe that science, given its universal character, can be instrumental in stimulating dialogue, openness and mutual respect, and in these ways serve the cause of peace. The organization is advised by an International Scientific Council and supported by UNESCO, as well as by various philanthropic bodies. In January 2006, twenty-seven joint projects in agricultural science, bio-medics, chemistry, environmental sciences and water resources, mental health, the humanities and in the social sciences were approved. UNESCO's role is mediating such co-operation and dialogue is of great importance given its mission for dialogue and the creation of a culture of peace.

It is significant also that on 8 September 2005 the first meeting between the Israeli and Palestinian National Commissions for UNESCO was held in the context of UNESCO's Middle East strategy and the Culture of Peace Programme.<sup>6</sup> This aims to devise and implement reconstruction projects in support of the populations and institutions of the Palestinian territories and, secondly, to encourage reconciliation through dialogue between individual Israelis and Palestinians and their respective civil societies. An example of the former is the

Programme for Palestinian European Academic Co-operation in Education (PEACE).<sup>7</sup> At its foundation, following a conference in Jerusalem, at a time when Palestinian universities were closed by Israeli military order, the Programme was supported by UNESCO and by the European Commission. It offers grants for Palestinian students to study abroad and organises staff exchanges and other forms of institutional support for Palestinian higher education. Such support in capacity building is essential if the conditions for genuine dialogue and future co-operation are to be achieved. There are other examples.

However, given the deep-seated hostility and continuing violence, aggravated by the recent events in Gaza which have divided the Palestinian people so bitterly, such co-operation remains exceptional. Many academics, let alone the Israeli and Palestinian publics cannot bring themselves to co-operate with what is still seen as the enemy. This attitude is aggravated by those from outside who identify themselves with the respective 'causes.' This is illustrated by attempts to boycott Israeli academic institutions and calls on the European Union to suspend Israel's participation in its Framework programme. This again raises the question of whether advocacy of what is seen as a just cause is preferable to even-handed mediation. It is certainly true that reconciliation cannot be achieved if injustice is ignored, as post-apartheid South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Ireland illustrate. This is not the same thing as refusing to recognise the other's right to exist, closing off opportunities for dialogue and for that co-operation that creates the space, as Buber puts it, for mutual respect and genuine community. This is where Buber's philosophy of dialogue and of social existence, together with his own practice, particularly in adult education, are potentially so rewarding for those who aim to end inter-communal conflict; and not only between Israeli and Palestinian. The initiatives described above are not inspired by Martin Buber explicitly, but the essentials of his thinking can be seen in each of them. A deeper understanding of his work and example and its application in situations of conflict could prove very fruitful. Two examples suffice. The first is a moral one illustrated by Buber's readiness to

enter into dialogue with the Germans in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The second is a practical one in that the results of scientific collaboration e.g. on water resources, will have a bearing on any formal peace settlements. The alternative is the continuation of resentment, hostility and bloodshed to the common detriment of all.

A reconsideration of Martin Buber's philosophy of education and its application to the resolution of inter-community conflict is a complex and major undertaking. Yet, it is, potentially, a significant task not only for scholarship but also for policy. The first step is to undertake a critical review of Buber's philosophy of education, of its implications for adult and non-formal education in particular. This should include a detailed analysis of Buber's own practice, notably in Germany both before and during the Nazi era, later at the Hebrew University and when in retirement. Buber's advocacy of Jewish reconciliation with the Germans at the end of the Second World War and his attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be reassessed according to the philosophy of ontology and of dialogue that he evolved. This would include necessarily an examination of his concepts of the individual, of identity, of community and of the individual in the community, not least the dissenting one, and of leadership and authority. The social and political implications of his philosophy and practice are considerable, as his book *Paths in Utopia* (1958)<sup>8</sup> demonstrates clearly. He advocated a third way between individualism and collectivism or a community based on the free association of mature individuals brought together through dialogue. He did not expect this to happen spontaneously, following mutual expressions of goodwill. Instead it is created by living out relationships through participation in the co-operative networks that animate communities.

This implies a role for non-formal education led by educators who are themselves part of the community, which is not unlike Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'organic' rather than the 'professional' intellectual. Opportunities for informal education through free participation in the community's network of associations should also be created. Buber

advocates an authentic civil society that acts as a shock absorber between the individual and the State, taking away as much from the latter as possible, while discouraging selfish individualism. This understands community as something organic, rather than mechanical, something to be nurtured rather than constructed. Mutually respectful and ultimately co-operative relations between communities in conflict depend on a very similar process. It is however, much more difficult because of cultural difference and often deep-seated hostility. Buber argues against programmatic nationalisms that are in competition. Instead his starting point is the identification of common problems and the need to address them jointly. This is the beginning of dialogue, with co-operation in education being a fruitful way of achieving this.

A critical comparison of Buber's ideas with those of other dialogical philosophers, educators and social commentators, such as Simone Weil, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Levinas, Paulo Freire, Mikhail Bakhtin, Luce Irigaray, Edward Said and others, needs to be

undertaken. Again, the extent to which Buber's philosophy of education is meaningful in the context of Islamic and other non-Occidental philosophies of education and of dialogue also needs to be attempted. Such an analysis needs to be placed within anthropological theories of ethnicity and identity, and with an understanding of methodological problems in researching communities that are divided, often violently. The aim would be a clear yet critical account of Martin Buber's philosophy of education that assesses its practical value as an intellectual and moral framework for reconciliation between communities in conflict and not only in Palestine-Israel. The task for educators in such communities, and also those external to them, it is argued, is to renew the philosophy of education as dialogue through educational practice.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber (1947) *Between Man and Man*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber (1947) *Tales of the Hasidim: The early masters*. Schocken Books, New York.

<sup>3</sup> *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2007. Middle East Publications, Jerusalem. ISSN 07931395 and [www.pij.org](http://www.pij.org)

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Chen, 'To get on the same page'. *Newsweek*, August 13 2007, p.23.

<sup>5</sup> See [www.ipso-jerusalem.org](http://www.ipso-jerusalem.org)

<sup>6</sup> See [www3.unesco.org/iycp](http://www3.unesco.org/iycp)

<sup>7</sup> See [www.unesco.org/general/eng/programmes/peace-palestine/](http://www.unesco.org/general/eng/programmes/peace-palestine/)

<sup>8</sup> Martin Buber (1958) *Paths in Utopia*. Beacon Press, Boston, Mass.

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